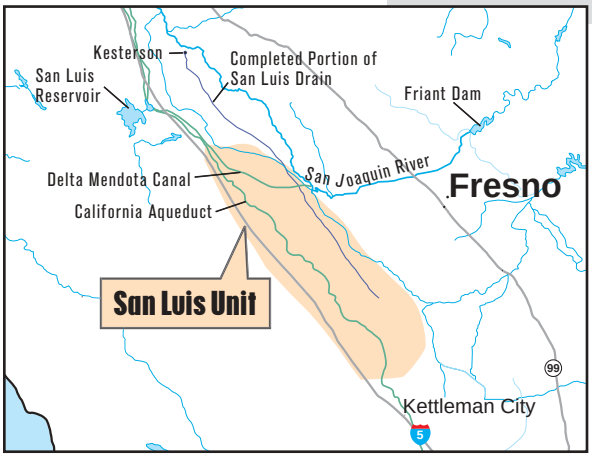
San Luis Drainage Feature Re-evaluation

Historical Perspective

May 2002

Introduction

The Reclamation is conducting a Feature Re-evaluation to study alternatives to collect, manage, and dispose of agricultural drain water from the San Luis Unit of the Central Valley Project (CVP). This fact sheet provides a brief history of the San Luis Unit and the legislation, projects, and court rulings that have brought Reclamation to the current San Luis Drainage Feature Re-evaluation.



Background Information

In 1960, Public Law No. 88-488 authorized the construction, operation, and maintenance of the San Luis Unit of the CVP, including the construction of San Luis Dam, San Luis Canal, Coalinga Canal, San Luis Drain, distribution systems, drains, pumping facilities, and other related works. The authorization provided irrigation water for the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. Construction of the San Luis Unit started in 1963, and the first significant water deliveries began in 1968. The San Luis Unit serves 700,000 acres of irrigated agriculture and includes the Westlands, Broadview, Pacheco, and Panoche Water Districts and the southern portion of the San Luis Water District. That same year, Reclamation began construction of the San Luis Drain, an interceptor drain to collect agricultural drain water from the San Luis Unit and ultimately discharge to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

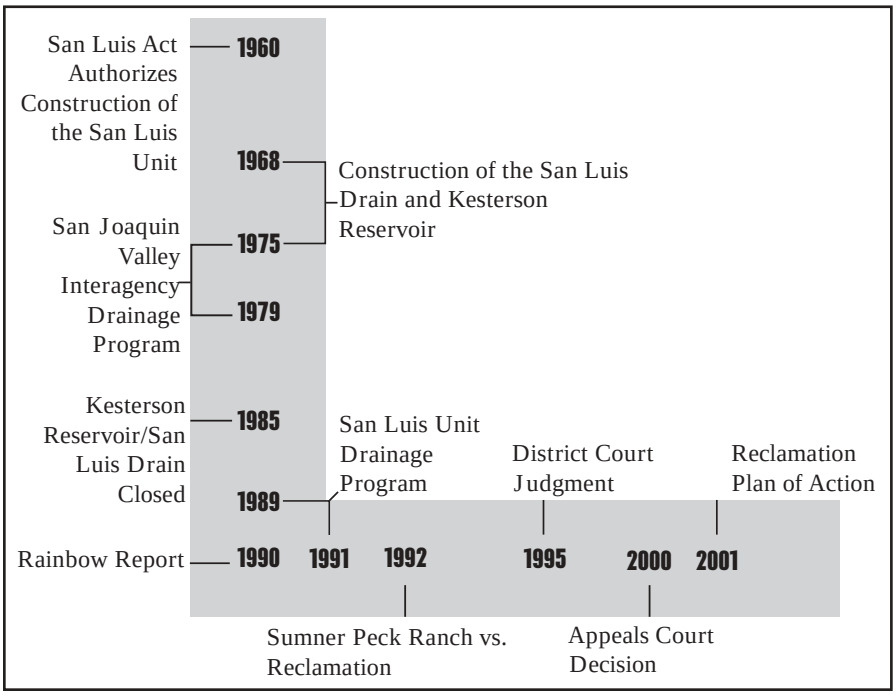
On-going Drainage Management Efforts

Over the years, farmers in the San Luis Unit have installed artificial tile drains beneath the soil of approximately 40,000 acres to collect agricultural drainage (approximately 5,000 of these acres are not currently farmed). The drains and sumps collect the water and direct it away from agricultural lands, most often to wasteways and sloughs that eventually drain to the San Joaquin River or evaporation ponds. These drains and sumps discharge approximately 58,000 acre-feet of drain water annually to the San Joaquin River. However, water drained away from these fields contains elevated levels of salts and other naturally occurring elements, such as selenium. Selenium can pose a hazard to wildlife and humans if allowed to concentrate in ponds or in waterways when agricultural drainage is reused on farms or discharged to water bodies.

The San Luis Drain

By 1975, Reclamation had constructed 83 miles of the planned 188-mile San Luis Drain and 1,283 acres of shallow ponds (later named Kesterson Reservoir) about 80 miles south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. These shallow ponds were designed to provide temporary storage to help control the rate of discharge to the Delta when the San Luis Drain was completed to the Delta. At that time, construction was suspended, pending determination of the final point of discharge for the San Luis Drain.

Between 1975 and 1979, Reclamation, California Department of Water Resources and the State Water Resources Control Board formed the San Joaquin



Valley Interagency Drainage Program. This group worked to develop an economically, environmentally, and politically acceptable solution to the valley's drainage problem.

During the ensuing years, Kesterson Reservoir received drain water and functioned as an evaporation facility. In 1984, waterfowl deaths and deformities at Kesterson were linked to elevated levels of selenium in the food chain. In 1985, the State Water Resources Control Board directed Reclamation to clean up and abate the conditions at Kesterson. Reclamation announced that Kesterson would be closed, and a phased elimination of San Luis Drain discharges was completed by June 1986.

In 1990, the San Joaquin Valley Drainage Program, a joint state and Federal investigation, published "A Management Plan for Agricultural Subsurface Drainage and Related Problems on the West side of the San Joaquin Valley, September 1990". This report, referred to as the Rainbow Report, recommended a series of "in-valley" drainage management actions. Reclamation also prepared a drainage plan and published a Draft Environmental Impact Statement based on these recommendations. Water users in the San Luis Unit rejected that plan because it only considered in-valley drainage measures and did not fully address long-term salt management.

In an agreement with Reclamation, Grassland area farmers are currently using a 28-mile portion of the San Luis Drain to collect and discharge drain water in exchange for reductions in selenium loads. The Grassland Bypass Project discharges into the San Luis Drain at Russell Avenue, and the drain water is conveyed to Mud Slough where it ultimately reaches the San Joaquin River upstream of the confluence with the Merced River.

Legal Decision

In 1992, several Westlands Water District landowners filed suit against Reclamation to provide drainage service to the San Luis Unit as described in Public Law No. 88-488. In 1995, the Federal District Court directed Reclamation to apply to the California State Water Resources Control Board for a discharge permit to complete the San Luis Drain to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. [Sumner Peck Ranch v. Bureau of Reclamation] In 2000, after an appeal, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the District Court's conclusion that Reclamation must act promptly to provide drainage service. However, the Appellate Court allowed Reclamation to consider possible drainage service solutions other than a drain to the Delta. Reclamation's Feature Re-evaluation is evaluating alternatives for providing drainage service to the San Luis Unit, including discharge to the Delta and other options evaluated in previous studies.

Contact us!

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